

Should the drinking age be lowered to 18?

**YES****Drinking 'licenses' promote responsible behavior**

BY DAVID J. HANSON

IMAGINE THAT WE PREPARED young people for driving the way we "prepare" them for drinking, if they choose to do so when they become of age. We would tell them that safe driving requires physical maturity and coordination, knowledge of rules of the road, driving experience that we won't give them because they're not ready, and emotional maturity that they don't have. Then, when they became of age, we would issue them licenses and tell them that it's much safer to take public transportation, that we hope they don't drive, but that if they do they should be careful and try to stay out of accidents.

President Emeritus of Middlebury College John McCardell, director of ChooseResponsibility.org, proposes that we consider issuing drinking licenses to 18- to 20-year-old adults who have completed a specified alcohol education course and who have not been found guilty of violating a state's alcohol laws. Such licenses might be graduated, like learner's permits, so that restrictions could be lifted incrementally after successful compliance with all their many conditions.

What about the argument that alcohol damages young brains? Actually, there's no evidence that drinking in moderation damages developing brains. If it did, most Italians, Jews, French, Greeks, Spaniards, Portuguese and many others would be suffering mental defects. And the frequently cited research on the subject uses rats and people who are alcohol abusers—not young people who consume in moderation.

What about the fact that those who begin drinking at an early age are more likely to experience drinking problems later in life? This correlation appears to result from pre-existing personality factors that have been identified. In fact, psychologists have been able to observe preschoolers and predict accurately which will begin drinking earlier and will later have problems.

It's time to rethink our approach to alcohol education and public policy.

David J. Hanson is professor emeritus of sociology at the State University of New York at Potsdam.

**NO****It's not safe for youth, nor on the roads**

BY WILLIAM DeJONG

TALK TO MY PUBLIC HEALTH colleagues about the proposal to lower the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) to 18, and this is what you'll hear: "I can't believe we're even talking about this." Why the strong reaction? We tried this experiment in the 1970s. When the death toll mounted, Congress passed legislation in 1984 to pressure the states to adopt an age-21 law, which has saved thousands of lives.



Members of the Amethyst Initiative—college presidents who have called for a renewed debate about lowering the legal drinking age—are sincere in believing that the age-21 law doesn't work, but they are badly mistaken. University of Minnesota epidemiologists Alexander Wagenaar and Traci Toomey reviewed 132 research studies published between 1960 and 1999. Their conclusion: A uniform national age-21 law has reduced both youth alcohol use and alcohol-related traffic crashes.

Point by point, the Amethyst Initiative's supporters have it wrong. Has the age-21 law led to an increase in college student drinking? According to the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* study, the answer is no. Rates of heavy drinking among

college students have fluctuated very little since the federal legislation was passed.

Will lowering the legal drinking age to 18 result in fewer alcohol-related problems? Again, the answer is no. We learned this from our experience in the United States, but we also have more recent history to draw upon. In 1999, New Zealand reduced its legal drinking age from 20 to 18. Predictably, an evaluation study showed that this policy change caused a big increase in traffic crashes and injuries among 15- to 19-year-olds.

Proponents of a lower drinking age want us to emulate France, Italy and other European nations where there is a lower MLDA (or none at all), and where parents introduce alcohol to their children at a younger age. Does this reduce binge drinking? No. According to the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, a majority of these countries have higher percentages of youth who report heavy alcohol use and drinking to intoxication than the United States.

The age-21 law is working. Let's leave it alone.

William DeJong is a professor of social and behavioral sciences at the Boston University School of Public Health.

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